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PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND PARENTS' DUTIES.

BY JULIAN HAWTHORNE.

OBSERVANT foreigners who visit us are apt to say that this is a children's country; that we pet and indulge our young folks to such a degree that everything else, except business, is given a subordinate place; and that the children take due advantage of their opportunity, ride over us rough-shod, treat us with scant respect, put in their little oar on all occasions, and habitually conduct themselves in a manner which we seem to think clever and amusing, but which, in any other country than this, would bring down upon them condign discipline. These observant foreigners point out that we are never tired of spending money on these children of ours; that there are books and periodicals especially for children, in vast numbers; that there are no such toy-shops as in the United States; that our children are dressed better than others; that immense pains are taken to provide amusements for them; and that, finally, no other nation spends such sums for the private and public education of their children as we do.

The number and efficiency of American public schools have become proverbial. Here, anybody, no matter how poor, can get any sort of education he or she pleases, free of cost, save to the public purse. To this cause are ascribed American intelligence and progress, and the triumphant democracy; for the children of rich, as well as of poor, parents are sent to public schools, and learn, in addition to other branches, the lessons of practical equality and fraternity. Of course, numbers of private schools exist and are prosperous; but, as a people, we believe in bringing up our young ones in democratic fashion, thereby guarding against the peril of their acquiring stuck-up notions, and imbibing the pernicious idea that there are such things as social grades, classes and masses—in a word, that one person is not just as good as another. And

Americans, say these foreigners, are accustomed to instance their eminent men as examples of the benefit of public schooling. Our mayors, our governors, even our Presidents, were public school boys. The American public school puts out of date such institutions as Eton and Rugby, Oxford and Cambridge, in England. We have our Berkeley schools, no doubt, and our Harvards, Yales, Princetons and Cornells, for those who care for such things; but the great mass of the people, the Americans who control the destinies of the Commonwealth, went to the public school, and they send their own children there. It is the normal thing in America. Such is the verdict of our genial critics, which we accept with a complacent smile, and we add to it, of our own motion, that ours are the best children in the world, because they have the best fathers and mothers.

Privately, between ourselves, meanwhile, we are willing to admit that the American public schools are susceptible of certain minor improvements. For one thing, there are not quite so many public schools as there ought to be; cases are known, especially in our large cities, where children have been crowded out for lack of seating-room; and the papers print pictures of weeping little girls and boys and tragic parents appealing to justice and heaven at this unrighteous deprivation; and indignant writers hold up to us the hideous contrast between rooms full of diligent little ones, sitting in rows, with happy faces, studying their books under the benign eyes of incarnate wisdom disguised as school-teachers, and the child abandoned to the street, with its thieves, murderers, drinking saloons, gutters, sewers and general filth, vice and diabolism. Shall it be said that such things were tolerated in free, rich and progressive America? Never! So down we go into our pockets, and build more public schools.

Again, it is sometimes intimated that the teachers in the public schools are not always quite all they might be. Some of them betray signs of incompetence; more often, duties are given to them too arduous to be fully discharged by any merely human agent; occasionally, they are unjust, or lose their tempers; now and then, they seem to neglect their little charges, but, for that matter, it is hardly to be expected that any man or woman, no matter how well equipped, should give personal attention to each one of some hundreds of children, or apportion to each just the degree and kind of instruction that each needs, or do anything except regard

the individuals in the mass, and impart to them, in conventional formulas, such information and guidance as the average child is supposed to require. The "average child," like the average man or woman, may be difficult to find; but we are forced, from necessity, to assume its existence. The only alternative would be to provide so many teachers that each particular child should be known to its instructor personally, and receive personal attention. But this is a counsel of perfection with a vengeance. Even as it is, the complaint is heard that teachers are not paid salary enough for their work, while at the same time our school-tax is higher than in any other country. Well, nothing in this world, even in the American part of it, is quite perfect. We may be well content to know that we are nearer to perfection than others, and are improving daily.

Admitting, then, that our public school system is as near to the right thing as it can be brought, let us inquire a little more closely into the condition and character of the product of it, the American public-school child, more particularly as it is found in our great cities. Of course, in the last resort, the public school is like other things, in so far as that by its fruits we shall know it. If it be so unexceptionable, then, inevitably, the child must be unexceptionable also. Is it so? Let us take a day from our business, and stroll about the streets, in the vicinity of the schools, at recess-time, or just after school is out for the day. At these hours the children fill the pavements, and are conducting themselves with that freedom and naturalness proper to the juvenile human being when emancipated, for a season, from the restraint of the public-schoolroom. They shout, they run about, play games, engage in mimic combats, indulge in lively dialogue. If we observe and listen, we shall get clearer and more correct notions of what they really are than by much watching beside the teacher's desk, or even by vigils within the privacy of the children's homes, where, also, spontaneity of speech and action is under restraint.

I confess I would rather the reader did this for himself than would I describe what, during the past year or so, I have learned by doing it here in New York. I did not have to go out of my way to get information; rather, at certain hours, it is difficult to find a retreat where the information is not thrust upon one. It is on earth and in air, it rushes at the ears and eyes, and permeates space generally. The children are not reticent; what is in them

is let forth with liberality and explicitness. And what is it that these our children let out? The majority of them are well-dressed and well-conditioned, their parents are of the better class, and evidently expect their offspring to take a respectable place in the community. Well, we hear as much slovenly, profane, and sometimes even foul, language as might be met with in the city slums; and we see vulgar, mean, petty conduct enough to suit the language. To look and listen, with your eyes shut, you would think that not the children of our solid citizens, who must presently carry on the business of the Republic, but a lot of naughty little toughs and hoodlums were on the rampage. The words and phrases sometimes used by these small people are really unproducing on respectable pages, and the tone in which they are uttered is yet more significant than the words. Their games are not conducted on principles of fair-play, honest give-and-take; but the participants bully and take advantage of one another. One almost never sees a square stand-up fight, but the usage is to hit in the back and run away. In their disputes, they give one another the lie as a matter of course, and are neither shamed nor do they expect to shame by it. The little girls are outwardly more decent than the boys, but they nevertheless betray a certain vulgarity which is not of good augury for their future. Their poor little airs and graces, their fluent slang, their precocious flirtations—how sorry one is to see them! Now, all these children “know better.” They act in this way because it is the fashion, and they prefer to adopt as models waifs of the streets rather than respectable people. So that it is no exaggeration to say that the whole school gravitates toward the level of the most disreputable little scallawag in it, or that they can pick up in the street outside. I am not over-drawing the case; it could not be overdrawn—in print. And, when the poor little things go home, they add hypocrisy to their other accomplishments, and modify their speech and actions to suit the conception which their parents have formed of what their children ought to be. Therefore, each parent believes that, however bad other children may be, his own are all right; and since, according to our Christian standards, no parent is concerned for the welfare of any but his own children, improvement is impossible.

Are the children to blame? Certainly not. Children are imitative, and it is the foible of human nature, mature and immature

alike, to imitate what is evil rather than what is good. It is easier to lie down than to stand erect, morally as well as physically. Boys, if left to themselves, feel a certain pride in being "tough;" they think it shows manliness and the superiority of age. The point is, they ought not to be left to themselves, but the very opposite of what unregenerate nature suggests should be diligently drilled into them. They should be shown, by precept and example, at all times, in what true manliness consists. By whom should this be done?

This essay is not an indictment against our public schools. They may not be, as has already been intimated, perfect. The principles on which they are administered may in some respects be faulty. The means by which those principles are carried out may be susceptible of improvement. But, upon the whole, the State does, more or less well, what it contracts to do. It implants in children's memories certain classes of facts: whether the facts be wisely or foolishly chosen is a minor question. It teaches them arithmetic and geography and other things of the kind; it prepares the child to "pass" certain examinations. But, having thus fulfilled its contract, it stops, and does no more. It takes no cognizance of the children's minds, rightly so called; of their hearts, souls, moral and social ideals. Training in morals, decencies, elevation of thought and conduct, cannot be administered to children in the mass, but must be separately adapted to each individual. American parents take it for granted, however, that, because the State instructs their children in arithmetic and geography and the other things, it must teach them all the Christian and social graces into the bargain. The consequence is that the children grow up knowing more than the hoodlums of the slums, but knowing, also, what the hoodlums know, and, therefore, worse off than if they were ignorant altogether. We already see the effects of this in our national life. Public school children become our shopkeepers, lawyers, politicians, contractors, saloon men, bank clerks, brokers, manufacturers, millionaires. They wear good clothes and appear respectable—are respectable in many cases. But a certain, not small, percentage of them are base in character, rotten in principle, loving mean actions, pursuing degraded ambitions. Our most dangerous criminals are not the hereditary class, but graduates of our public schools. Most of the men whose careers disgrace their country, either in a small or a conspicuous

way, have been public school boys. Most of our women who go astray have attended public school. These people are gradually giving a tone to the entire community; their tendency is to sap the foundations of our national honor and freedom. It is vain to contend that many, even the majority, of public school children turn out well. That may be true; sometimes it may appear more true than it is, for, as children mature, they learn to cover up vices learned at school, and wear an outside of decency from motives of prudence. Yet, the vices may not be extirpated. The frailty, the defect, whatever it may be, remains, and, when the man or woman is brought to the test, it will betray itself. What are we going to do about it? The first thing we ought to do is to recognize the fact that the public school children who go wrong are not to be charged against our public school system, but against parental neglect and abandonment. They are the product of education by the State, unsupported by training in the family.

This essay, then, is not an indictment of American public schools, but of American parents' neglect of their children. We do not do our duty by them. It is too soft an expression to say that we entrust them to the State; we abandon them to it. America is the children's country, perhaps; but it is so in a sense less flattering to our vanity than we might wish. We pay for their book-learning, their amusements, and their indulgence; but we deny them what it is our chief concern to give them—opportunity to develop character. Yet, it is in order to afford them that opportunity, or, we might say, to compel them to that development, that we, as parents, exist. If we fail to do it, we might as well, as parents, not exist at all.

We are a busy people, devoted to business. We work hard every day to make ends meet, and, even after ends have met, we generally keep on working from habit, or from some vague form of ambition or another. We say we are fond of our children. We are fond of them, in a way—a selfish way. We see them after office hours, at meal times, on holidays; we amuse ourselves with them, indulge them, get them to show off a little, ask them whether they have been regular in their school attendance. If they answer this question in the affirmative, and we find them reasonably proficient in their studies, we are satisfied; we discharge our souls of further responsibility. We have entrusted them to the State, and the State takes better care of them than we could. For which

of us is as wise as the State, or has the State's resources? Have we the leisure to teach them arithmetic and geography? Or are we competent to do so, if the leisure were available? And even were this the case, it is not expedient to keep children too much at home; they ought to go out in the world, to measure themselves against other children, get knocked about a bit, and have the nonsense taken out of them. "Oh, no!" we cry, waxing enthusiastic; "there is nothing like sending children to the public school—entrusting them to the State!" In short, we neglect and abandon them, just as we neglect our civic duties—because we imagine we cannot spare the time to attend to them, but must be in our offices, making money, or seeming to do so. Not one man in a hundred, to put it very moderately, has any knowledge of how his children pass their hours out of school, of what they learn in those hours, and of what the consequences to them are.

The exceptional man does know. I have in my mind a man of my acquaintance, who sends his little son to public school, but who never lets go of the child's hand, so to say. He is one of the busiest men I know, working often sixteen or eighteen hours a day; but he always has leisure to attend to that son of his. To see them together, you would think he had nothing to do but attend to his son. He knows precisely what that child is studying in school, just what progress he is making, who his teachers are, with what other school-children he is intimate, and what his opinion of them is. He is aware of what kind of thoughts the child's mind is productive when the child is not with him; not what the particular thoughts are, but their character and quality. For this is apparent not so much in what the child may say or do when they are together, as in his manner of saying and doing, his tone, the scenery of his soul. He goes over his studies with the boy; he prays with him when he goes to bed at night; he talks with him, leading him on to express opinions, and to consider those which he himself expresses. He never allows the boy to see in him anything which is less than honorable and decent, or the idea to enter the child's mind that his father can be otherwise than conscientious, courageous and magnanimous. The two are friends and mutual confidants; the boy knows that his father is both just and kind—that he will always forgive the sinner, though never giving quarter to the sin; and, on the other hand, that a good or generous deed or word will always draw sunshine from his face, though

seldom words of praise from his lips. Withal, there is no humdrum solemnity and formality in their intercourse. On the contrary, it is free, full of humor and playful irony, manly and cheerful, but mutually respectful. This boy passes through the loose-tongued uproar of the streets unscathed. His glance is straightforward, his bearing confident but modest. He is a boy to the tips of his fingers, but you cannot talk with him without feeling that the soul of a gentleman is in him; and a woman would know instinctively that he would protect her, if need were, to the last atom of his small strength. This boy, who is no fancy picture, is far from perfect; further yet from the goody-goody, molly-coddle kind. From some points of view, he seems all faults; faults of temper, of pig-headedness, of overbearingness, of selfishness, every now and then, due however to thoughtlessness, not premeditation. But he is quick always to make amends, and never happy till he has done so. The faculty of dissimulation is not in him; you can tell by his face what his mood is; there is none of that smug, demure meekness or sanctimoniousness which glosses the features of the young rascals who come into the house fresh from the lies and foulness outside; who sneakingly avoid your eye, or, quite as often, stare you out of countenance as they pour forth a flood of virtuous protestations. No; the public school has not hurt this boy, and there are many others like him; but his family has not neglected him. His family recognizes the nature of the function of the public school and where it stops; and, at that point, they come in and supply its deficiencies,

As for the others, nominally they have fathers and mothers, but in reality they are orphans; they seem to have homes, but their true home is the gutter—for they feel at home nowhere else. The parents are to blame. Neither public nor private schools, nor anything else, can absolve parents from their responsibilities. The plea of lack of time is a false plea; it is not the length of time you spend with your child that counts, but the use you put that time to. The discipline, the training, the inspiration of home admit of no substitutes; and parents will observe that, if they do right by their children, they will derive from the latter quite as much training and enlightenment as they can impart to them. While you are building up and polishing off your boy's character, he is chastening yours, and keeping you on the edge of your mettle. You may fancy that it is a privilege to your boy to have you

for a father; but it is at least as much a privilege to you to have him for a son—provided you *are* a father to him, and not a mere idle and vicious appendage. And that sort of appendage is precisely what a large percentage of American fathers are. It does not mend matters to say that you are fond of your children, and, in proof of it, to paw them and kiss them, give them toys and candy, picture books, circus tickets, skates and bicycles; or to scold them violently and unjustly when they happen to get upon your nerves, or in your way. An ape can slobber over its offspring, and give it nuts or cuff it, as whim may dictate. Selfishness is at the bottom of our failure to give proper attention to our children; it is selfishness all the way through. We want the fun of having children, without incurring the liabilities. We want to have them around us, when we are in the humor, and to have them look nice, and display all suitable merits and accomplishments, but we do not wish to be bothered with the task of inculcating the same; that, we devolve upon the public school. We would not allow our most confidential clerk to engineer a critical deal for us in the market or on 'Change; but we have no hesitation in permitting a school teacher, to us unknown, underpaid, tired to death, averse from her or his occupation probably, and sometimes incompetent, to determine the lines upon which our own flesh and blood, with his immortal soul, is to take his departure in life; lines whose direction and grading will practically settle his future. The outcome of the deal on 'Change will immediately and perhaps vitally affect our pocket, but the outcome of the boy will not appear until he is an orphan in name, as he already is in fact, and, meanwhile, its symptoms are hidden from us by the boy's own precocious hypocrisy and our conniving blindness. And yet, children were created to go to heaven, while bank-accounts sometimes operate to incline their owners toward another place.

This is not a light matter, but an important one, quite national in its scope. It becomes more menacing every year, because the public school child of to-day is the parent of the public school child of to-morrow, and will do as he has been done by. Unless we mend our ways betimes, there will be no mending them at all. If the children do not improve, they will grow worse. Let us not forget that in old times they used to be much better in this very respect; American home life was not splendid or sumptuous, but it was pure and healthy in tone, and children were brought up strictly—too much

so, if anything—in the way they should go. There were not so many public schools then; the State did not take quite so much on its shoulders, and parents took a great deal more on theirs. If the children of those days went wrong, it was not for lack, not of good counsel alone, but of good example likewise. America had not yet been dubbed a children's country; but it was a country where children were faithfully and honorably treated. Well, the *laudator temporis acti* has his labor for his pains. What is to come, is the point. Conceding whatever may be advanced in favor of public schools, it is nevertheless a truth that the greater the attendance at them becomes, the more sedulous should we be to counteract the evils incident to them—or to supplement the benefits, if it be preferable to put it in that way. All kinds of children go to them, and society is contagious, low society especially. The more the State helps the parents, the more should the parents help themselves; the more urgent becomes their responsibility. The more arithmetic and geography the school puts into the child's brain, the more decency and honor should the parents instill into his heart. The devil is always after him, and can attack him in a thousand ways; but the angels can reach him only through his parents; or, at all events, his parents have no right to assume the contrary. It is desirable, no doubt, that our children should have their schooling; but it is a bitter necessity that we parents should first get ours, that we should learn to realize what our parental duties are, and compel ourselves to do them.

JULIAN HAWTHORNE.